

Director Takes Revival to Heart



Museum saved from extinction

By Annemarie Kropf, *Mohawk Valley Business Journal Staff*, Issue Date: 11/1/02

UTICA, NY; Three years ago, Marlene Brown changed the direction of her life, as well as that of the Children's Museum of History, Natural History, Science & Technology by joining the organization's board of directors. "All I had anticipated was being a board member", Brown says. "This is not what I had planned."

Today, Brown is president and executive director of the Childrens Museum. In this role, she has managed to turn a debt-ridden organization into a must-see facility. It's been the biggest challenge of my life,"Brown says, "but it's an enjoyable challenge. We're making a huge difference in the lives of children and their families."At age 65, Brown has as much energy as the children who come into the museum.

A lively, talkative woman, Brown conveys a sense of enthusiasm about each exhibit within the five-story, 30,000-square-foot building. These exhibits include Exploration Station, a play village with numerous stores; a reconstruction of an Iroquois longhouse; the Living Science Learning Center, which houses rabbits, turtles, fish, and a snake; and Toys B.C. (before computers), as well as numerous interactive exhibits. "We've created a safe, enjoyable education environment,"Brown says. "It takes most people at least two hours to get through the place."

The museum opened in 1963 in the basement of the Utica Public Library, but it soon outgrew its space. In 1980, the board of directors purchased the former Hieber Dry Goods Building on Main Street, and moved the museum there. Brown joined the museum's board of directors in 1999, and as time wore on, the organization became "deeply in the hole, financially."In 2001, the museum was \$100,000 in debt. The former executive director was let go on Oct. 29, 2001, for financial reasons. Board members then wanted to sell the building, but Brown refused. "I said, 'You're not going to do that,' "she recalls.

Instead, Brown and her husband, Earl Lewis, worked 80 hours a week for eight months, as unpaid volunteers, to turn the museum around. In June, they applied for major grants, but didn't receive them. The reason was that there was no executive director at the museum; there were only board members. The rationale was that no one else would have the same dedication and work long, unpaid hours. The board members decided to fire Brown as board president and rehire her as president and executive director of the museum. By that point, the board had paid off \$50,000 of its debt.

As executive director, Brown laid down a few rules to which all employees must adhere. One rule is that customer service must be outstanding throughout the building. Keep the facility clean is another rule. The last rule is to watch the bottom line at all times. Brown says that she faced many skeptics who wondered whether or not she could save the museum. She says that the major turning point in people's opinions came in August, when the director of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration

donated a model Mars rover for exhibition. “The paper and TV stations carried it,” she notes. “That was the major turning point.”

In addition to adding exhibits, Brown also began what she calls “marketing on a shoestring.” Brown created all the marketing materials on her home computer and worked to get visits from local organizations such as the Scouts. She managed to have the Children’s Museum listed on a Web site devoted to museums of the world, and now receives international visitors. Those visiting the museum are also reminded about upcoming events or ways to become involved at the museum via flyers posted throughout the building. So far, the plan has worked. Currently, \$86,000 of the debt is paid off and Brown hopes to have the remaining \$14,000 paid by the end of the year.

Brown is currently working to open the fourth floor of the building to patrons. The theme of the floor will be “transportation yesterday, today, and tomorrow.” Brown has received donations from the Utica Fire Department and the Police Department for the exhibit. A man also donated a small fiberglass plane inside which children can play. There is no heat or electricity yet on the fourth floor, but that’s not stopping her. “If you live in an area all your life, and have been involved with this and that, you make a lot of connections,” she points out, adding that numerous local contractors have offered their services.

Opening the fourth floor on Dec. 6 is the immediate goal, but Brown would also like to open the fifth floor. After that, she wants to expand the museum to the roof, with a conservatory and a planetarium. Brown doesn’t pay attention to her critics. “What I did in a year most people didn’t think could be done,” she notes. Brown had business experience prior to joining the museum.

In addition to being a retired teacher, Brown owned three businesses. She was a business futurist, speaking on future trends. She owned a marketing company as well, and then began a Web-design and -hosting company, TechnoTouch, which she still owns. Brown says past business experience has helped her as executive director.

“All of that has lent itself to strength needed to be successful in a place like this”, she says. “There are so many things to do”.

Brown says she has no plans to retire any time soon, and notes that there is much more in store for the Children’s Museum. “At this point, I want to stay here as long as my energy level keeps up,” she says. “I don’t consider anything impossible. There’s no such thing as try. You either do or don’t do”.